

findings

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A Bestiary
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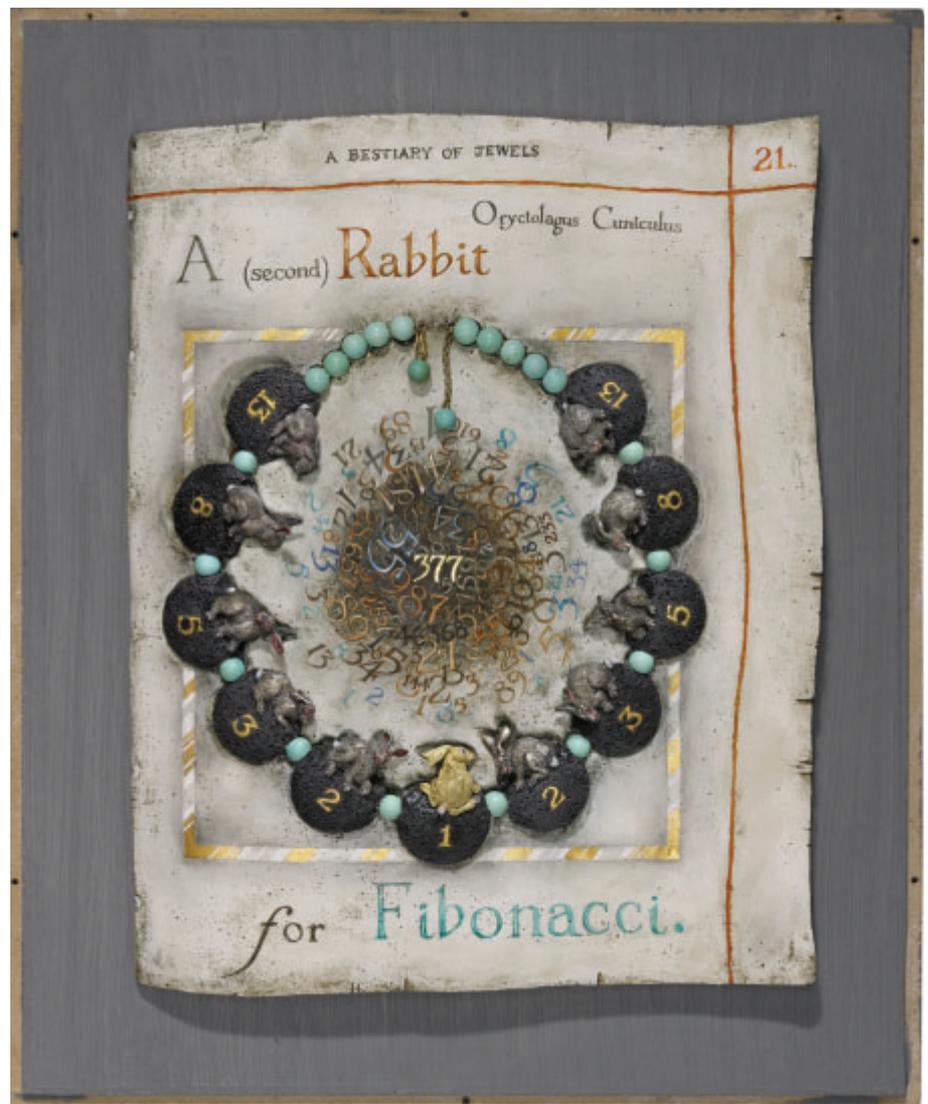
Kevin Coates: A Bestiary Of Jewels And In Conversation: Doctor Coates & Professor Cook

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. 15 March 2014.
Lieta Marziali

For those who might not know the work of Kevin Coates, he's been described as "Britain's leading master goldsmith" (The Times), showing "extraordinary technical virtuosity" (Mobilia Gallery) and the British "Leonardo" (Harper's & Queen)¹. His jewels are works of art in the most traditional and perhaps the purest and most accessible sense: highly figurative, rich in symbolism, perfectly executed. In truth, there is nothing I could possibly say here about the artistic value of Coates's work without falling drastically into the banal.

Instead, what I did find difficult to edit out of these lines was how emotional the visit had been. So I apologise in advance if saying that the moment I set eyes on the first pieces of the Bestiary I was filled with sublime beauty sounds too much like a cliché. My companion and I clutched our magnifying lenses in wide-eyed awe and explored every centimetre of every piece with the bouncy enthusiasm of a child who has made an amazing discovery. But while she also agonised over how impossible it would ever be to match his mastery, my reaction was that such beauty was a gift that we should treasure. After all, if we all had the ability to achieve it, there would simply be none left to behold.

If you, like me, are fascinated by narrative – not only in its manifestation as stories but in its very machinations – Coates's work is the ultimate treat. The Bestiary consists of 21 jewels set in individual page mounts: as is often the case with Coates, pieces are autonomous when they interact with the wearer but can be allowed to rest and communicate



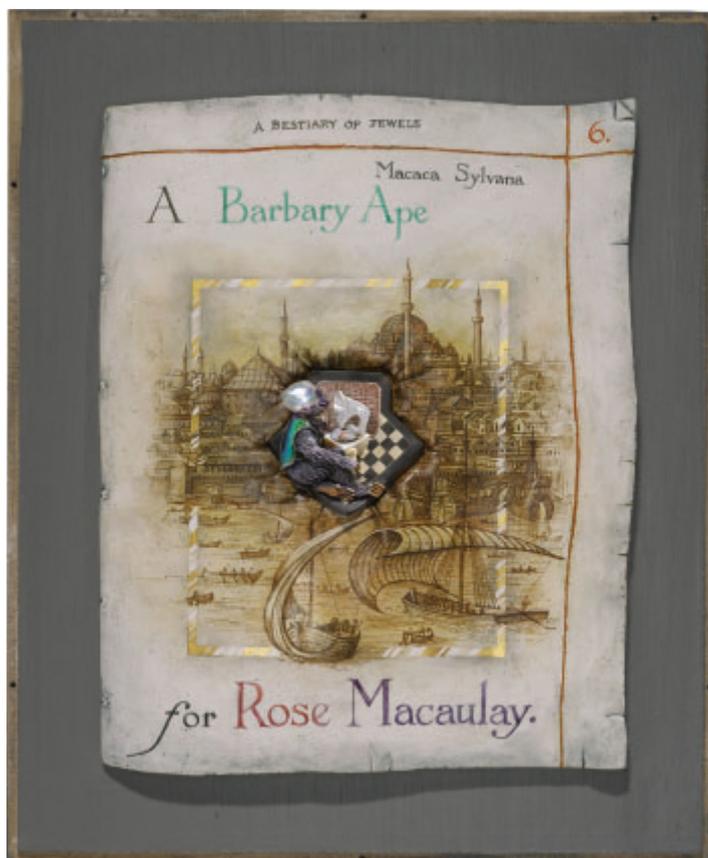
Kevin Coates "A Barbary Ape for Rose Macaulay", 2014, silver, 18ct gold, mother of pearl, black and grey horn, baroque pearl, 19th c. Venetian gold glass tablet, beetle wing-cover inlay, amethyst. Photo: Clarissa Bruce.

the maker's intention when lying in the object that holds them. Each jewel pairs two creatures, animal and human, advocating that equality of species that is such a strong undercurrent in the work. He takes the format of a book – the mediaeval Bestiary – already didactic in its original purpose, and turns its every page into a living narrative, teaching us not only about fascinating historical and literary anecdotes, but also about the mechanisms through which connections are made.

Connections, Coates explains, lie at the base of most of his work. A piece of music (his other enormous passion), a colour, a stone all have emotions, he says. In a continuous state of synaesthesia, he "reads" these emotions and connects stories and images through the language of materials. A self-declared magpie, he sees silk in the iridescent green of a beetle's wing-cover, a turban in the volume of a baroque pearl². Reading the enthralling accompanying catalogue³ and hearing him talk⁴, one really gets the feeling of how his collecting extends to stories themselves, from which threads are pulled to connect imagination and making in a state of constant creative joy.

The exhibition was deftly curated within one of the small galleries, a controlled environment with no distractions that allowed the visitor to immediately delve into the pages of the book. Narrative took centre stage and the jewels, in their readable mounts, fulfilled their intended destiny of channelling the energy and life acquired during the making process into the development of their own relationship with the viewer.

For me, this man, avuncular in his demeanour and yet nearly elvish in his age-defying appearance, is a hypnotic narrator with his voice and his pen as well as his hands. He creates his jewel stories which, in turn, make him our hero and, in a never-ending narrative cycle, he becomes legend.



¹All quotes from Mobilia Gallery, Cambridge, Massachusetts, www.mobilia-gallery.com/artists/kcoates/ (last accessed 24 Mar 2014)

²"A Barbary Ape for Rose Macaulay", No. 6 in the Bestiary of Jewels

³Kevin Coates: A Bestiary of Jewels (2014), published by the Ruthin Craft Centre in association with the Ashmolean Museum, with the support of the Zvi & Ofra Meitar Family Fund, ISBN 978-1-905865-63-5

⁴In Conversation: Dr Coates & Prof Cook, Headley Lecture Theatre, Ashmolean Museum, 15 Mar 2014

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